

## Message Text

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PAGE 01 BRUSSE 07252 231513Z

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ACTION EUR-12

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FM AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 7496

INFO AMEMBASSY BONN

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AMEMBASSY LONDON

AMEMBASSY LUXEMBOURG

AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMEMBASSY ROME

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E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: EAGR,BE,PINT

SUBJECT: THE 1976 DROUGHT IN BELGIUM

SUMMARY: RAIN,WHICH HAS OCCURRED SPORADICALLY OVER BELGIUM SINCE JULY 12, HAS BROUGHT SOME RELIEF TO THE WORST DROUGHT AND EXTENDED PERIOD OF HOT WEATHER IN MANY YEARS. THIS TELEGRAM PRESENTS A PRILIMINARY OVERVIEW OF THE EFFECTS OF THE ADVERSE WEATHER. END SUMMARY.

1. THE 1976 DROUGHT AND HEAT WAVE IN BELGIUM BROKE RECORDS (KEPT SINCE 1832) FOR TEMPERATURES REACHED,AND NUMBER OF SUNNY HOURS IN JUNE AND JULY. SINCE JANUARY, BELGIUM HAS RECEIVED ONLY BETWEEN 30 AND 50 PERCENT OF ITS AVERAGE NORMAL RAINFALL FOR THAT PERIOD.

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PAGE 02 BRUSSE 07252 231513Z

2. THE MAJOR EFFECTS HAVE BEEN THE FOLLOWING:

(A) THE MOST SERIOUSLY AFFECTED SECTOR OF AGRICULTURE IS BEEF AND DAIRY PRODUCTION DUE TO POOR PASTURE CONDITIONS. LACK OF ADEQUATE GRAZING HAS RESULTED IN HEAVY USE OF WINTER FORAGE AS WELL AS INCREASED SLAUGHTERING OF BEEF AND DAIRY CATTLE. THE JUNE SLAUGHTERING RATE WAS APPROXIMATELY 25 PERCENT ABOVE NORMAL. MILK PRODUCTION THROUGH LATE JUNE HAS, HOWEVER, REMAINED STEADY.

(B) OVER 5,000 ACRES OF FORESTS BURNED DURING THE FIRST TEN DAYS OF JULY FIGURES ARE NOT AVAILABLE FOR PREVIOUS MONTHS THE FORESTS HAVE BEEN CLOSED BY GOVERNMENT ORDER TO HIKERS AND CAMPERS.

(C) THE OUTLOOK FOR GRAIN PRODUCTION (MAINLY THE WINTER CROP) IS BETTER THAN FIRST EXPECTED ALTHOUGH 1976 WILL BE THE SECOND SUCCESSIVE YEAR OF BELOW AVERAGE OUTPUT. THE FOLLOWING 1976 ESTIMATES ARE COMPARED TO THE 1974 LEVEL WHICH WAS A MORE NORMAL YEAR FOR GRAIN PRODUCTION. BASED ON EXPECTED YIELDS, WE NOW ESTIMATE THE TOTAL 1976 WHEAT CROP AT 946,000 METRIC TONS COMPARED TO 1,004,000 TONS IN 1974, AND THE TOTAL 1976 FEEDGRAIN CROP AT 940,000 TONS COMPARED TO 992,000 TONS IN 1974.

(D) SUGARBEET PRODUCTION WILL PROBABLY BE BELOW AVERAGE BUT RECENT RAINS MAY HAVE PREVENTED SERIOUS DAMAGE.

(E) THE POTATO CROP WILL BE BELOW AVERAGE, AS IT WAS IN 1975. THE 1976 CROP IS ESTIMATED AT 1,145,000 TONS COMPARED TO 1,460,000 IN 1974.

(F) BARGE TRAFFIC ON CANALS HAS BEEN SERIOUSLY AFFECTED IN SOME OF THE SMALLER CANALS FOR LACK OF WATER - LOADS HAVE HAD TO BE REDUCED BY UP TO 75 PERCENT. OVERALL, HOWEVER, BARGE TRANSPORTED GOODS AND CARGOES MOVING THROUGH BELGIAN PORTS HAVE NOT BEEN SERIOUSLY AFFECTED.

(G) URBAN WATER SUPPLIES ARE ADEQUATE FOR THE MOMENT, BUT FORMAL RESTRICTIONS ARE IN EFFECT FOR ALL NON-ESSENTIAL USE (WATERING GARDENS, CAR WASHES, ETC.) AND THE GOVERNMENT HAS URGENT CONSERVATION BY ALL.

3. A CABINET-LEVEL DROUGHT COMMITTEE, COMPOSED OF THE MINISTERS OF AGRICULTURE, DEFENSE, PUBLIC HEALTH, UNCLASSIFIED

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PAGE 03 BRUSSE 07252 231513Z

ECONOMIC AFFAIRS AND INTERIOR, WAS FORMED JULY 8. THE COMMITTEE HAS STATED TO PUBLISH DAILY WHAT IT DETERMINES ARE FAIR PRICES FOR BASIC AGRICULTURAL COMMODITIES IN THE HOPE OF PREVENTING PROFITEERING. IT IS EXPECTED TO MONITOR FOOD PRICES CLOSELY OVER THE NEXT SEVERAL MONTHS IT IS COMMONLY THOUGHT, HOWEVER, THAT FOOD PRICES THIS COMING WINTER WILL BE UP SHARPLY OVER 1975 LEVELS PRECIPITOUS RISES IN

THE PRICES OF CERTAIN COMMODITIES,NOTABLY FRESH FRUITS AND VEGETABLES,HAVE ALREADY APPEARED,AND ARE EXPECTED TO RESULT IN A RECORD ONE-MONTH JUMP OF THREE POINTS IN THE CONSUMER PRICE INDEX FOR JULY. THIS RISE,DISTURBING ENOUGH FOR AN ECONOMY WHERE INFLATION REMAINS HIGHER THAN THAT OF ITS CHIEF TRADING PARTNERS, WOULD ALSO TRIGGER AN INCREASE IN WAGES,AND OTHER COSTS PEGGED TO THE INDEX IT PUTS ADDITIONAL PRESSURE ON GOVERNMENT POLICYMAKERS CAUGHT BETWEEN PRESSURES TO REDUCE THE INFLATION RATE AND THE POLITICAL NECESSITY OF MAINTAINING GENEROUS SOCIAL BENEFITS AND RESPECTING THE INDEXATION SYSTEM.

4. IT IS WIDELY BELIEVED BELGIUM WILL NOT BE ABLE TO HANDLE THE DAMAGES TO ITS AGRICULTURAL SECTOR WITHOUT ASSISTANCE FROM ITS EC PARTNERS.

5. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE DROUGHT ARE SO FAR LIMITED. ONLY ABOUT 3.5 PERCENT OF BELGIUM'S GNP IS BASED ON AGRICULTURE,FORESTRY AND FISHING, WITH APPROXIMATELY THE SAME PERCENTAGE OF THE TOTAL POPULATION ENGAGED IN THESE OCCUPATIONS DIRECTLY AFFECTED TO SOME DEGREE. PRICE RISES WILL AFFECT ALL AND MAY AFFECT BELGIUM'S COMPETITIVE POSITION BUT THE FULL IMPACT WILL PROBABLY BE CONTAINED UNTIL AFTER THE OCTOBER COMMUNAL ELECTIONS THERE ARE RELATIVELY FEW FULLTIME MARGINAL FARMERS IN BELGIAN AGRICULTURE WHO RISK LOSING THEIR MEANS OF LIVELIHOOD DUE TO ONE CROP FAILURE IT IS STILL TOO EARLY TO TELL WHAT THE BROADER IMPACT WILL BE ON OTHER GROUPS, SUCH AS CONSUMERS AND WAGE EARNERS AND THE POSSIBLE ECONOMIC EFFECTS ON THE ECONOMY AS A WHOLE.

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PAGE 04 BRUSSE 07252 231513Z

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